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## Leaving Footprints and Taking Memories

**In an annual White Desert expedition, participants take out much more than they bring in**  
*By Andrew Stelzer*

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Cairenes Amal Huzzan and Yasmin Gohar police the

A MOONSCAPE OF GIANT white limestone rocks, many shaped like mushrooms, the White Desert contains an amazing diversity of scenic terrain ranging from hills of black rocks to mountains made of crystal — and unfortunately, the occasional pile of trash.

The 3,000 square kilometer desert, designated a protectorate by the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency in 2002, is a peaceful getaway to some and a means of financial security for others.

"When I saw the picture of this place, I asked, is this in Egypt?" says Ahmed Adel, a Cairene who volunteered to pick up trash littering this eco-tourist destination that lies six hours southwest of the capital.

Adel was among more than 150 others coming from 12 countries in 45-degree Celsius heat to pick up trash in the annual White Desert Cleanup. Held every May since 2001 and sponsored by The Farafra Development Association and Friends of the White Desert — two NGOs that focus on environmental preservation — the annual cleanup aims to raise awareness among both tourists and tour guides in an effort to encourage eco-friendly tourism. Saad Ali, the general manager of The Farafra Development Association, says that about a decade ago he saw the negative impact tourism was having. Gathering support from local tour guides and nearby residents, Ali set on a quest to both clean up the desert and the oasis towns themselves.

"The local community needs to care about their places." Ali says. "They don't need to wait for anybody."

Besides locals linked to the eco-tourism industry and residents coming from the five desert oasis towns neighboring the site, the clean up also attracted other NGOs focusing on preservation, foreigners, students and urbanite do-gooders from Cairo.

In addition to the abundance of toilet paper and cigarette butts, volunteers collected a wide array of rubbish, ranging from underwear and fishing line to British wine bottles and cheese packages from Greenland. By the end of the week, the group had picked up more than three tons of trash, including several steel-drum fire pits that had been illegally buried in the sand. Most of the participants said the cleanup was a success, but feared its effects will be undone in November with the start of the next tourist season.

### A Reality Check

To say that the foreign volunteers were dumbfounded by the pollution would be an understatement. The foreigners, who are not used to seeing trash lining streets or people casually littering, did not understand why there was so much rubbish in the sand. "The desert is such a beautiful area. To pollute it, it's a shame," said Martin van Doorne, a Dutch citizen who was one of 80,000 tourists to visit the area last year and returned to help with the cleanup. According to him, tour guides who exploit the White Desert for profit are those who are most likely to pollute. "The leaders of the responsible tour groups take the trash out of the desert. It's only the men [tour group leaders] who want to make quick money, that leave trash behind."

Conversation often turned to the dirty air and streets of Cairo, a seemingly insurmountable problem. "What kind of system could you have for the 20 million people?" wondered Monica Biba, a German volunteer. "When we left Cairo did you see the cloud we left behind us? You could almost touch it."

"People are so busy," says Amal Huzzan, a retired engineer from Cairo who came to the desert with one of her daughter's friends. "They don't imagine that if they teach their children to be clean or not to throw paper in the street, that it will be a clean country or a clean city."

"Here in Egypt, people have no idea, they just throw everything on the street [] they're just raised like this," says Line Hendricks, a 22-year-old Belgian who volunteers with AFS teaching Alexandrian schoolchildren about the environment. "There are no trash cans or anything, so all you can do is throw it on the street."

"We're in a developing country, so unfortunately, that means that there are issues that take precedence," says Jennifer Toepke, an American who ran a scuba-diving school in Hurghada for 12 years and now works with the Abu Salama Society, an NGO focusing on the preservation of the Red Sea. "When you tell someone about the plastic bag that's in the street, they may look at you and say, 'What about the guy sitting next to the plastic bag [who] doesn't have a home? It's all relative here, but I would say that the government first of all needs to at least put in an infrastructure where there are waste disposal facilities, where there are garbage cans at the very [minimum] in the streets."

Many participants were frustrated that resources still don't exist to bring the collected rubbish to Cairo for recycling and incineration. For now, it simply gets dumped in a giant, constantly growing trash heap.

"It's for sure not solving the problem, but it's a good start," says Eliza Bella, an Italian who recently opened a gelato and coffee shop in Hurghada. "I do not know the country which has solved the problem of garbage."

### The Bigger Picture

Its one thing to pick up the trash, but Ali nicks the problem in the bud by stopping it before it starts. Last year, he started a training course for guides and drivers on how to be good stewards of the desert. More than 100 guides attended the course, which was so successful that Tareq Elqanawaty, director of the White Desert Protectorate, says that the local government is considering making it a requirement for all guides leading tours in the White Desert.

Many have followed Ali's lead and have also vowed to clean up other moneymaking eco-tourist spots. Hesham Tomoum, projects manager at the Abu Salama Society, who came to help out with the cleanup, says that his NGO plans to do a similar project in Hurghada, both in and out of the water.

"Environmental work in Egypt started very recently," explains Elqanawaty. "The big problem before [was that] the tourism within the protected area was not organized, and [the guides] would do some activities just to make the client happy, without thinking about the environment or safety."

Over the past years, there has been a serious problem with people taking four-wheel-drive vehicles into the protectorate and leaving tire marks on the pristine white rocks that give the desert its name. Because of these desert joy riders, Elqanawaty says he can't keep up with the number of phone calls he gets reporting the license plate numbers of violators. "It's more responsibility, but it's very nice from the other side, because the society supports your work and they are believing in what you are doing."

Tomoum shares a similar sentiment, saying "the key element" to environmental preservation is local involvement.

"The locals conserve the place for their kids because they know that their kids have to receive it from them in the same condition it is, so that they would also generate income," he adds. Indeed, with tourism being the number-one industry in the desert, preservation of the natural landscape doesn't just feel good; it's an economic necessity.

### Coming Together

Cleanup week has become an opportunity for residents from the five oasis towns in the Western Desert to spend quality time together after the competitive mood of the busy tourist season has died down for the summer. The camaraderie was evident during the event as every night Columbians, Germans and Bedouins danced together to traditional music under the desert moon. Talat Mulah, who runs Eden Garden Tours, a small operation out of Bahariyya, says that while the environmental benefits of the cleanup are wonderful, the event offers more than that. "It's more important to see different nationalities [] and to help each other, and to take opinions from one another, and in end we do something good for the place where we live."

There is some hope for the White Desert. Elqanawaty says he'd like to set up 20 permanent campsites and build a visitors center along the road where those entering the park would pick up garbage bags, as well as a portable toilet. According to him, one of the most important things tourists can do is realize that spending time in the desert — even just one night on a camel safari — is "a very hard type of tourism."

"Leave your footprints and take your memories," says Ali. While that phrase has already become the eco-tourist's mantra in much of the world, it is slowly catching on in Egypt.

You don't even have to be an outdoorsman to be a good eco-tourist. Elqanawaty laughs, as his voice is almost drowned out by Bedouin drumming and singing: "So if you don't like to go to the desert and have a hard-time adventure, just go to visit the pyramids and stay at a nice hotel, and drink beer at night."

Just make sure you recycle the bottle. [et](#)

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The annual expedition collected nearly three tons of garbage from the protectorate this year.



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The volunteers and guides take a hard-earned break.